

Introduction

*When it comes to erotic health, nothing is more important
 than the interplay of eros and ethics.ⁱ*

~ Jack Morin

*The question of whether a [moral] code is good or bad
 is the same as the question
 whether or not it promotes human happiness.ⁱⁱ*

~ Bertrand Russell

We do not learn for school, but for life.ⁱⁱⁱ

~ Seneca

There are many ideals about sex in the world. Even if we could not immediately name them, we all have an idea of what they are or at least have a vague idea of some people who represent them. There is the woman who has a high sex drive, but who feels guilty about her desires and tries to resist them. The man who really enjoys masturbating, but who feels guilty about it. The woman who has sworn off masturbation entirely. The man whose life goal is to have as much sex as possible. The parents who see their young child touching her genitals and shames her for this, telling her that children should not be sexual. The priest, monk, or nun who has given up sexuality entirely for religious reasons. All of these people hold different ideas about sex and different ideals for sex. Even people who do not manage to live by these ideals often still hold them as ideals. These ideals fit into three broad camps: those who *resist* sexuality, those who *abstain* from sexuality, and those who *indulge* in sexuality. Interestingly, and perhaps surprising to some, these people have all been influenced by an ancient, but still critically important, debate about the nature of sex and its role in human life.

Unfortunately, this ancient debate has not been kind to sexuality. Broadly, the history of ethics can be classified into three primary camps regarding sexuality: the “Resistant,” the “Abstinent,” and the “Indulgent.” While these three camps all have different ideals about the role of sex in a human life, they are united in that their ideals will not help us to live happy lives that include sex in healthy ways, as we shall see. The only way to fix the attitudes that plague our culture is to address the philosophy head on—to provide a new approach to sexual ethics that integrates sex into what it means to live well. This is precisely what we will do in this book. However, we must briefly look to the past to get a better understanding of these debates before we can move forward, so that we may avoid their pitfalls and understand where we fit in, or fail to fit in, the debates.

The Resistant camp is the tradition of resisting emotions, appetites, and desires—especially sexual ones. In its modern incarnations, it gives rise to rules about which sexual acts we should do and which sexual feelings we should allow ourselves to feel. The best example of this was put forth by Plato in the *Phaedrus* (253d), where he used the metaphor of a charioteer pulled by two strong steeds: a beautiful white purebred stallion (reason) and an ugly black stallion (the “passions” or emotions). Plato claims that in order to maintain our chosen path, we must tame the black stallion of emotions as much as possible so that the two horses work together. If the black horse cannot be tamed, then it will pull the chariot astray. Plato even uses sex as his quintessential case of strong passions, and so his moral psychology relies on sex to get off the ground. Unfortunately, he simply stipulates, without justification, that resisting the passions is virtuous and says that the white horse of reason also loves “self-control” (253e) and is controlled by his “sense of shame” (254a). Thus, the Resistant camp regarding sexuality was born, as well as the idea that we should feel shame when we give into our “base desires for sex.”

The essence of this camp is still common today in the idea that we should only engage in sex in moderation, and even then, only certain kinds of sexual acts are permissible. This school really caught its stride in Thomistic Catholicism (Catholicism as influenced by Thomas Aquinas), which stipulated that the only acceptable form of sexuality was vaginal penetration by a penis, for the purpose of reproduction, in a marriage sanctioned by the

church, when both partners were fertile and capable of producing children. Even so, a person is not supposed to enjoy it too much or too frequently.¹ This idea is still prevalent today, whether its religious underpinnings are evident or not, as the idea that enjoying sex too much is somehow unhealthy or dangerous and therefore sexuality should be resisted.

The Abstinent camp comes from the tradition of rule-based moral systems that call for us to abstain from sex. This is in order to build a certain constitution such that we can always be ready to obey rules and do our duty. In this camp, it is not merely that we should *resist* some sexual urges while others are okay; rather, we should try not to experience sexual desires at all and we certainly should not act on them. This, too, is exemplified by Plato, who took a dualist position and believed that people are truly immortal souls² trapped in prisons of the flesh. He believed that to be able to return to the perfect realm (or “heaven”), we must abstain from the corruption of the soul by the body, with its appetites and emotions, as far as possible. Plato is not subtle about this and says in the *Phaedo* that: “The body keeps us busy in a thousand ways because of its need for nurture. [...] It fills us with wants, desires, fears, all sorts of illusions and much nonsense [...] and it is the body and the care of it, to which we are enslaved.” (66c). He also writes: “The soul is polluted when it leaves the body, having always been associated with it and served it.” (81b).³ Insofar as a person does give into their bodily impulses, they pollute their soul and weaken their constitution.

The essence of this camp is still common today in the idea that we should abstain from sex in order to remain in control of ourselves and to be ready to do our duty. Moreover, we should resist most desires and emotions, so as not to have potential conflicts with our duty. Within this camp, to whom we owe the duty varies—whether to a god, the state, or the *Volk*. One of the best examples of this camp is Saint Augustine, another of the fathers of the Catholic Church. He is known for his hatred of sexuality and for being one of the major forces in turning Christianity away from sexuality.⁴ Augustine thought that sex was always to be avoided, so that one could maintain a “pure” soul and always be ready to do the Christian God’s bidding (presumably Augustine cared little if one was ready to do Zeus’s or Shiva’s bidding). Some versions of Stoicism (an ancient Greek/Roman school of philosophy/religion) also advocated abstinence from sexuality to cultivate *apatheia*,⁵ or a sense of internal peace uncorrupted by emotions or strong desires. Kant as well pushed for abstinence from sexuality, going so far as to equate masturbation to self-murder⁶ and saying that “[Sex] is a principle of the degradation of human nature.”^{iv} In whatever form, the idea that we should forgo sex in order to maintain a dutiful constitution is still very common today (as with the idea that athletes should avoid sex so as to not “weaken” themselves).

While these two camps differ on the role that sex should play in life, whether a very restricted one or none at all, they are united in that they believe that sex is harmful. Thus, they give us no guidance about how to

¹ Seneca, although he predates Aquinas (and all of Christianity), shares the same idea in *On Marriage*: “Indeed, any love of someone else’s wife is disgraceful, but so is excessive love of one’s own. The wise man ought to love his wife deliberately, not passionately. He controls the impulse to pleasure and is not led headlong to intercourse. Nothing is more disgusting than to treat one’s wife like an adulterer.” (from Nussbaum, *Therapy of Desire*, p. 473; Trans. Nussbaum). Stoics can be found in both the resistant and abstinent camps.

² Unless talking about someone else’s theory, we will use the terms “soul,” “mind,” and “spirit” interchangeably throughout to mean that aspect of a person that thinks, feels, desires, etc.

³ More broadly, Plato is thoroughly misanthropic: “nothing among human things is worth much seriousness.” (*Republic*, 604b12; trans. Nussbaum, from *The Therapy of Desire*, p. 92)

⁴ Augustine, to be fair, appears to have the support of Jesus himself: “Jesus replied, ‘Not everyone can accept this word, but only those to whom it has been given. For there are eunuchs who were born that way, and there are eunuchs who have been made eunuchs by others—and there are those who choose to live like eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven. The one who can accept this should accept it.’” (The Christian Bible, New International Version, *Matthew* 19:11-12)

⁵ Cicero, for example, is clearly in the abstinent camp: “For just as it is a moral offense to betray one’s country, to use violence against one’s parents, to rob a temple, which are evils in result, so too to fear, to grieve, to have erotic desires are each of them a moral offense, even without any result.” (Cicero *De Finibus*, 3.32, Trans. Nussbaum. As found in *Therapy of Desire*, p. 365)

⁶ “But it is not so easy to produce a rational proof that unnatural, and even merely unpurposeful, use of one’s sexual attribute [masturbation] is inadmissible as being a violation of duty to oneself (and indeed, as far as its unnatural use is concerned, a violation in the highest degree). The *ground of proof* is, indeed, that by it a man surrenders his personality (throwing it away), since he uses himself as a means to satisfy an animal impulse. But this does not explain the high degree of violation of the humanity in one’s own person by such a vice in its unnaturalness, which seems in terms of its form (the disposition it involves) to exceed even murdering oneself. It consists, then, in this: That a man who defiantly casts off life as a burden is at least not making a feeble surrender to animal impulse in throwing himself away” (Kant. *The Metaphysics of Morals* (Trans. Mary Gregor), p. 425)

integrate sex into our lives in healthy and life-affirming ways. Yet, most people desire to have sex in their lives and so many often seek refuge in the third camp: the Indulgent camp.

The Indulgent camp comes from the tradition of hedonism. This camp holds that the only good thing is pleasure and so a person should do whatever they can in order to maximize their pleasure. This camp is exemplified by Aristippus (a follower of Socrates) and the Cyrenaic hedonists, who believed that pleasure is intrinsically good and that immediate pleasure ought to be our only moral aim. This school embraces sexuality enthusiastically and without any reservation whatsoever. Indeed, it says that we should have sex with whomever, whenever, wherever, however, we can, as long as it is pleasurable. If we return to Plato's metaphor of the charioteer, where the Resistant camp picked the white horse, the Indulgent camp accepts the conflict, but chooses the black horse instead.

The Indulgent camp never achieved widespread popularity. Yet, throughout history, it has had its adherents and resurgences: in more recent memory, France had its "Libertine" movement and the U.S. had the sexual revolution of the 1960's and 70's which advocated "free love." Even when there is not a large movement, individuals and small groups are sometimes drawn to the Indulgent camp, thinking that they have found the secret to a good life. One of the most common ways this manifests today is radical subjectivism about sexuality: they believe that since pleasure is both intrinsically good and the goal of morality, whatever feels good to them is moral. They believe that there is no way for one person to judge the pleasures of another and no standard to use besides pleasure.

Much like the Resistant and Abstinent camps, the Indulgent camp offers us no advice about how to incorporate sexuality into our lives in a healthy way. Indeed, the imperative to indiscriminate indulgence is no advice at all to someone who wants to live a good life: it is too myopic and neglects much of what it is to be human, while also failing to bring about the pleasure it so desperately craves. Worse, though, is that there is an inherent irony in the Indulgent camp. However, this will not clearly manifest until we have presented our views and so we will return to these objections against the Indulgent camp in the Conclusion.

Having seen the three primary responses to sexuality throughout history, a person could quite reasonably be exasperated. What if a person finds value in sexuality and wants to enjoy it in healthy ways? For this person, the history of ethics has little of use to offer.

That changes now.

The major theme of this book is that sexuality is not a lapse in moral strength, a corrupting influence, or an area of our lives with respect to which morality is neutral; rather, sexuality is an important expression of our ethical lives (this will be fully elaborated in Chapter 7). Moreover, we are particularly able to express our moral selves through sex in a way that not many other things can rival, since sex brings so much of ourselves to bear. In my view, virtue does not lie in rules subjugating our appetites, desires, and emotions, but in aligning these with our conscious ends so that we can flourish and, at the same time, feel good about doing so (which has the added benefit of creating meaning in our lives, a point we will explore in Chapter 1). By becoming integrated into our happiness, our appetites and desires become expressions of our moral ideals and help to drive us towards the best life open to us. Moreover, by integrating our emotions into our ethical framework we can have much richer and more rewarding lives than we could have otherwise.

Sexuality, then, does not stand in opposition to morality, but rather is one of the most powerful driving forces behind our flourishing and moral development. Or, it can be, *if* we integrate it into our lives in the right ways. Thus, *Eros and Ethos* presents a new option for how we should view sexuality: not as something to distrust and ward against with rules, but as an important moral facet of our lives, through which we can express our moral selves.

My project here is both new and radical: to create the first system of ethics that shows the deep value that sexuality has for a good life. I am going to show how sexuality can be integrated into our lives in healthy and life-affirming ways. To do this, I am going to create the first eudaimonistic sexual ethic. By "eudaimonistic,"⁷ I mean that it involves the rich sense of happiness of a good and full life. We will sometimes simply use the word "happiness," but in English that word has come to mean something more like the feeling of joy or contentment and has lost its richer and deeper meaning. Eudaimonism is not only the correct morality for human life, but it also leads to the best kind of sex life possible, as we shall see. I will also need to create a new conception of

⁷ Eudaimonistic is pronounced: you-die-moan-ist-ic.

moral psychology and a new theory of emotions and sentiments that will underpin much of the later work (which is the subject of Chapter 2). All of this will be clearer as we proceed through the book.

A few editorial comments. First, *Eros and Ethos* is being published in three volumes due to its length and a natural split between volumes. The present volume, Volume 1, deals with the more theoretical work of creating the first eudaimonistic sexual ethic. In Volume 2, we will apply this theory to particular topics to show its usefulness and how it can answer previously intractable problems, such as abortion, “non-traditional” relationships such as polyamory, and “kinks.” We will find that the answer to many of these questions is nuanced and that whether they will benefit or harm our life largely depends on how we engage in them. Volume 3 will be a collection of essays that grew out of the writing of *Eros and Ethos*, but could not find a proper place in Volume 1 or 2. They either expand upon ideas in earlier volumes or attempt to clarify them. It is my intention that after all three volumes are completed and published, an omnibus edition will be published that combines all three volumes into a single book. To this end, chapter numbering will be continuous between volumes.

Second, some comments about formatting. I have put clarifying comments in footnotes (designated by Roman numerals) and reserved endnotes for references (designated by Arabic numerals). Thus, the reader need only to turn to the endnotes if they wish to find references and no commentary will be missed by not doing so. Each chapter has a summary and conclusion at its end and certain readers may wish to read these first, in order to have an overview of the chapter before diving into its details. Quotations, especially epigraphs, are not an unqualified endorsement of an author and should merely be construed to show that I agree on that particular point or that I think the author makes a point particularly well. I do not intend to speak for any other authors and I certainly do not intend to let them speak for me.

One final remark with respect to the style of the book. In contrast to some authors who equate obscurity and confusion with profundity, this book has been written with clarity as one of its primary goals. Nietzsche says that: “Whoever knows he is deep strives for clarity; whoever would like to appear deep to the crowd strives for obscurity. For the crowd considers anything deep if only it cannot see to the bottom.”^v It is my firm belief that philosophy should help us to clarify problems and help us to live good human lives. Philosophy is for *living* and understanding the world around us in the deepest ways. In order to do this, it must have clarity as one of its primary goals.

One of the marks of good philosophy is that if we were to ask ourselves the question before we read the philosopher’s answer, it would seem incredibly complicated. But, once we read their answer, it becomes clear (if not simple). That is, the mark of a good philosopher is making complicated ideas relatively easy to understand. The opposite, muddying of the waters to make them appear deep^{vi}, will bring no value to our life or improve our understanding of the world. Such tactics prey upon insecurity and ignorance, or as Aristotle more eloquently says: “conscious of their ignorance, they admire those who proclaim some great thing that is above their comprehension.”^{vii} Clear thinking leads to a better life and that is something that we should all desire.

With that, I welcome you to our philosophical journey. You fellow lovers of wisdom who burn with curiosity and are driven to understand the world as deeply as you can, this book was written for you.

Jason Stotts
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Buy *Eros and Ethos* on Amazon: <http://amzn.to/2tbpCBV>

ⁱ Morin, Jack. *The Erotic Mind*, p. 312.

ⁱⁱ Russell, Bertrand. “Our Sexual Ethics,” *Why I am Not a Christian*, p. 170.

ⁱⁱⁱ Seneca. *Moral Epistles*, CVI “On the Corporeality of Virtue.”

^{iv} Solomon, Robert. “Erotic Love as a Moral Virtue,” from *Virtue Ethics Old and New* (Ed. Stephen Gardiner), p. 93. Referencing Kant’s *Lectures on Ethics*, trans. Infield (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1963), p. 164.

^v Nietzsche. *The Gay Science*, aphorism #173.

^{vi} Nietzsche. *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, “On Poets,” p. 128 (paraphrase).

^{vii} Aristotle. *Nicomachean Ethics*, I.4.1095^a25.